



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

August 24, 2022

Mr. Randy Erwin
National President
National Federation of Federal Employees
1225 New York Avenue NW
Suite 450
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Erwin:

Thank you for your letters of March 14, June 1, June 6, and July 11, 2022, in reference to wildland fighter pay, occupational series, and housing. Retaining firefighters with pay, benefits, and career opportunities that reflect the importance and danger of the work they do is critical if we are to cope with the mounting wildfire threat. I know our respective staff have met regularly and have discussed the content of your letters, but I do want to also provide a written response.

Firefighter Pay

Since the BIL was passed in November 2021, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), (along with both Departments' Offices of Human Resource Management), have successfully worked together on the firefighter series and pay provisions. As you know, the temporary pay increase provisions are being delivered in four parts:

- 1) As of June 27, 2022, 10,973 Forest Service wildland firefighters received their first retroactive payment dating back to October 1, 2021, through May 21, 2022, pay period 10;
- 2) Bi-weekly pay increases began on July 3, 2022, pay period 14. This pay will begin their bi-weekly payments under the BIL Pay Provisions to reflect 50 percent of their base pay or \$20,000, whichever is less. The base salary increase applies to firefighter designated positions (primary or secondary positions alike), whether they are permanent or temporary;
- 3) A second retroactive payment will be made in August 2022 and will cover pay period 11-13 May 22, 2022 – July 2, 2022; and
- 4) The last of the initial payments will be made in September 2022 and cover the difference in the Fair Labor Standards Act computation for overtime accrued from October 1, 2021 through July 2, 2022

Additionally, we agree that we need a permanent pay solution, and we will continue to work with DOI and OPM to accomplish that.

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Firefighter Series

As you know, OPM, in coordination with USDA and DOI have also announced the Wildland Firefighter Occupational Series. Agencies will implement the new series in the coming months, and current federal firefighters will be able to choose whether to opt-in to the new Wildland Fire Management series or stay in their current occupational series. New recruits will go into positions in the new series. The Forest Service will be re-advertising all wildland firefighter positions as soon as appropriate position descriptions and requirements are updated for the new series. The information will be shared widely on USA Jobs Website at: <https://www.usajobs.gov/>, the Forest Service Website at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/>, and other web based recruitment venues. Also, we will continue to explore overtime, hazard pay, portal to portal and differentials as they pertain to the new series.

Firefighter Housing

The Forest Service recognizes that housing is a dilemma across the nation and particularly for Forest Service employees, including firefighters, who typically live and work in rural communities and remote settings. USDA continues to work to find solutions that will benefit all employees and resolve many of the disparities you have identified.

USDA will continue efforts to address firefighter recruitment, firefighter tour of duty, conversion of temporary to permanent appointments, the use of available hiring authorities. I appreciate your recommendations and will take them under advisement as we work through these challenges.

Lastly, since BIL funds for the temporary pay increase will be spent by the end of FY23, we are working with DOI and OPM on a joint FY24 proposal for a permanent updated, competitive, and equitable pay structure, along with a support system that will address the many challenges that have plagued our wildland firefighter workforce for decades.

Again, thank you for writing and sharing your perspectives and recommendations on the wildland firefighter workforce. If you have any further questions, please contact Antoine L. Dixon, Deputy Chief for Business Operations, at (202) 205-1707 or at antoine.dixon@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary